

U.S. FOREIGN PRESS CENTERS SERVE AS GATEWAYS TO AMERICA

**By
Jane A. Morse and Todd Bullock**

Washington File Staff Writers

WASHINGTON, MAY 8 -- Covering the United States can be a tough job for any news reporter. It is even tougher if you are a foreign reporter.

Reporters from other countries need to learn how the U.S. government and its legal systems work and develop those all-important contacts in the Congress, the White House, the State Department and a bewildering array of other government agencies.

The U.S. Foreign Press Centers (FPC), located in Los Angeles, New York and Washington help journalists meet these challenges. Each year these centers serve more than 2,000 foreign journalists, both resident and visiting.

The State Department's deputy spokesman, Adam Ereli, described the State Department's three Foreign Press Centers as "America's face to the world. They are how the foreign press sees us," so it is important that "we make a strong and positive first impression," he said.

Through a variety of programs, the centers help reporters from other countries do their jobs and facilitate accurate and balanced reporting of U.S. policies and society. Duncan MacInnes, the director of the Foreign Press Centers, called the foreign correspondents who work in the United States "important windows into American society for publics around the world." He said that, although the first Foreign Press Center was established almost half a century ago, the centers are more relevant today than ever.

"People around the world increasingly learn about American policies and society directly from their local and regional media. Our job is to help foreign correspondents get an accurate and in-depth understanding of the United States in all its diversity and complexity," he said.

Jess Baily, director of the Washington Foreign Press Center, told the Washington File that "Washington, especially, is a crowded media environment." Foreign reporters

are often competing with "beat" domestic journalists who "are much more focused on a particular institution or set of issues and know the players better," he said.

PROVIDING ACCESS TO TOP U.S. OFFICIALS, EXPERTS

Access to top U.S. officials and experts is a critical element for any news reporter. The centers regularly schedule briefings -- open to the foreign press only -- with high-ranking U.S. officials and experts who can answer country- and issue-specific questions.

Journalists have a chance to attend briefings by senior U.S. officials on a broad range of issues. Recent FPC briefers included Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez, Under Secretary of State R. Nicolas Burns, FBI Assistant Director of Public Affairs John Miller, Supreme Allied Commander - Europe General James Jones and U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations John Bolton. The centers also have hosted leading civic and business leaders like Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist, an online community that has revolutionized how consumers buy and sell goods, find jobs or locate an apartment.

The Foreign Press Centers also organize reporting tours, ranging from half-a-day in major cities to two or three days in more far-flung parts of the United States. Joe Bookbinder, who has put together many tours on topics ranging from U.S. foreign policy formulation to religious freedom, told the Washington File that "reporting tours provide journalists with a chance to experience the diversity of American society, to meet people from all walks of life, and gain a better understanding of how our democracy works." (See U.S. Life and Culture (http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/life_and_culture.html).)

FACILITATING COVERAGE OF U.S. ELECTIONS

According to Baily, the most popular reporting tours for the centers are the ones scheduled during the U.S. elections. During these tours, "we will take a group of journalists to a state to see a primary or a presidential debate, to meet the candidates and the people working on the campaign and just to interview ordinary voters," he said.

"It can be hard for a foreign journalist to get access to a campaign," he said, "obviously because the campaign is interested in reaching out to U.S. voters and [organizers] have their media strategies, which often do not include foreign journalists."

Vastly improved communications technology, especially the Internet, have changed the way foreign journalists work. Transcripts, video clips and photos are easier to obtain. But the increase in available information brings the drawback of deciding what sources are credible.

FPC information specialist Miriam Rider told the Washington File that one of the centers' "most valuable services for journalists is to provide them with information that they can't find themselves." Rider routinely researches hard-to-find background material for stories on subjects that range from policy issues like nuclear proliferation to popular subjects such as the history of the hamburger. She often knows what journalists will need before they even ask, and posts special Web pages on hot issues such as immigration, disaster relief and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Baily said the Foreign Press Centers issue credentials that are useful identification designed to help journalists obtain access to news sources. But he emphasized that these credentials are not required.

"Someone is a journalist if they say they are a journalist and that is all it takes in the United States," he said.

According to Baily, foreign correspondents working in the United States range from someone who works in a very large bureau with multiple staff researchers and wire services, to a one-person bureau who may be "stringing" (working as freelance writers) for several foreign publications.

"We are trying to adapt our services to become more of a network of contacts and information for an increasingly mobile web savvy press corps," Baily said.

For more information on U.S. policies, see Freedom of the Press (http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/rule_of_law/press_freedom.html).

More information on the Foreign Press Centers (<http://fpc.state.gov/fpc/>) is available on the State Department Web site.

=====

(The Washington File is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)
NNNN

